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DOCUMENTS

Secret Reports of John Howe, 1808, I.

THE feeling of acute tension between Great Britain and the United States in 1807 resulted in detailed preparations for defence throughout British North America. Civil governors gave way to men whose strength lay rather in the fact that they were experienced military officers; old fortifications were renewed, and new ones planned; military stores were suddenly augmented; while the numbers of the militia and their proficiency in the manual of arms became important, burning topics.¹ Amid this threatening rattle of arms the employment of secret service was once again resorted to as an auxiliary force of no mean value. Two movements run parallel in east and west: in Lower Canada Sir James Craig received the now famous letters of John Henry in the spring of 1809, while in 1808 Sir George Prevost, lieutenant-governor at Halifax, was gleaning information along similar lines from the reports of John Howe. Likewise in each case the prologue is well defined. If Prevost's predecessor Sir John Wentworth and certain official associates took the first step to discover the real disposition of their American neighbors whose trade was so important for Nova Scotia, the correspondence of H. W. Ryland affords a clear view of preliminary movements at the other extremity of British North America.

With Sir James Craig and the letters of John Henry we need spend little time. They are well known. It will be sufficient to note that the guiding spirit in this affair was Herman W. Ryland, a relative of the English royal family, who came to Canada with Lord Dorchester, and had become almost a permanent secretary to the governors. He carried on the tradition of Dorchester's secret service, and corresponded with several persons on various political topics of a confidential nature.²

On the other hand the records of secret service in Nova Scotia

¹ This is amply proven by state papers in Q and M series in the Canadian Archives at Ottawa.

² Letters to him from John Richardson and John Henry are in Lower Canada Sundries of the S series at the Dominion Archives. The Henry letters given *in extenso* in the *Canadian Archives Report* for 1896, Note B, are taken from series Q. Some in series S have not been printed. The Henry letters bought and printed by President Madison, and dated at Boston, March 5-May 25, 1809, may be most conveniently seen in *American State Papers, Foreign Affairs*, III. 547-552.

during this period are almost unknown, and no satisfactory account has ever been given of the documents printed below. They are taken from series M at the Dominion Archives at Ottawa, numbers 577 F-577 H inclusive. The originals are among Colonial Office papers at the Public Record Office, London, series "Colonial Correspondence, Nova Scotia", volumes 41-45 inclusive (new reference "C. O. 217", volumes 81-85 inclusive).

It is not difficult to trace the steps leading up to the formal mission of John Howe. It could hardly be unknown to all high officials in British North America that Jefferson's embargo policy was decidedly unpopular in New England. The murmurings of the disaffected and the comparative looseness of the federal bond were other patent facts of the time. As a result we find British officials both in England and in America endeavoring to obtain a more exact knowledge of the political situation in the United States with a view to profiting thereby should war ensue. When fugitive items were not deemed sufficient the sending of regular agents logically followed. It is significant that both Lower Canada and Nova Scotia sent emissaries to those parts of the United States in whose trade they were chiefly interested; the commercial relations of Nova Scotia covered a wider field.

On October 26, 1807, Sir John Wentworth wrote to the colonial secretary as follows:³

As accurate information of the military movements, occurrences and intentions in the neighbouring Country's, is essentially necessary at this interesting and anxious crisis of Public affairs, to enable His Majesty's servants in command here, to take precautionary measures for defence with effect, or to frustrate any hostilities contemplated against the King's authority in these Colonies, Vice Admiral Berkeley, Major General Hunter and myself have thought it, not only adviseable, but too seriously essential to omit despatching a person well qualified, to observe whatever may be agitating.

This preliminary agent was Lieutenant Girod, who returned in May, 1808, and delivered his report.⁴

The character of the information which reached Halifax at this time may be judged from two extracts. The first was written by Major-General Martin Hunter, then commanding the military at Halifax.⁵

By a gentleman on whom I can depend that arrived here on Sunday last from New York I found at that time no further preparations were

³ Canadian Archives, series M, 577 E, Wentworth to Castlereagh, no. 177, Oct. 26, 1807.

⁴ Can. Arch., series M, 577 E, Wentworth to Cooke, May 25, 1808. Lieut. Girod's report is printed as no. I., below.

⁵ Can. Arch., series M, 577 D, Hunter to Castlereagh, Nov. 11, 1807.

making for the defence of the City, except some additional Batteries on Georges Island. The narrows still remained unfortified; he counted thirteen Gun Boats sailing about in the Harbour he said he was certain that the Eastern members of Congress to a man were for Peace, but that they were much afraid at New York that they would be out voted by the Southern members. In the event of Hostilities with England it was generally supposed the Indians were inclined to join us.

The second was penned by Sir John Wentworth, and is as follows:⁶

This District [New England] is offended at the interference of France in the affairs of the Union, too obviously to be doubted, and with a separate interest driving them to War, and alarmed at appearances, that the Conquest of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, under the command of General Moreau, will bring the power of France so near to New England as to entail war and corrupt means for their subjugation. They also wisely appreciate their probable loss, and present inability for carrying on a maritime war, and are jealous, that their interests are not considered by those in Government, who urge a rupture with Great Britain. These impressions are so deeply prevailing, that they will act coldly, and not impossibly, if compelled will openly refuse aid. . . .

The members of Congress from the Eastern States on their journey to Washington, frequently declared, they were resolved to vote for Peace, and Mr. Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury signified to his private friend—That secret instructions were sent, to their minister in London, not to insist too seriously on their claims, rather seeking moderate modifications.

As a result of these reports Sir George Prevost, Wentworth's successor, received formal instructions from the colonial secretary, which ran in this wise:⁷

In addition to the official instructions you have received, I think it right to furnish you with some private suggestions which may be of use according to exigencies.

It is believed that the Leaders and Inhabitants in general of the North Eastern States entirely disapprove of hostile measures against this Country, of which they seem by their Publications and Votes, to deny both the Policy and Justice. If this spirit be as sincere and as general as we are led to suppose, no means should be unemployed to take advantage of it.

With this view, I am to desire you will use your utmost endeavours to gain Intelligence with regard to the projects of the American Government in General, and particularly those of the States bordering upon His Majesty's Territories; and as this service cannot be effected without Expence, I am to authorize you to make such advances as you shall judge necessary, and to draw Bills for the amount upon my under secretary Mr. Cooke. . . .

⁶ Can. Arch., series M, 577 D, secret despatch (no. 178) from Wentworth to Castlereagh, Nov. 14, 1807.

⁷ Can. Arch., series M, 577 E, draft of private and secret despatch to Sir George Prevost, Downing Street, Feb. 13, 1808.

If, upon the breaking out of Hostilities, you shall find the adjacent States indisposed to active Warfare, and willing to enter into any private arrangement for mutual convenience in point of Trade; you may possibly turn this Disposition into a Means of facilitating the Introduction of British commodities and manufactures. The Power you will have of giving the Americans Indulgence in Fishing, in obtaining Gypsum from New Brunswick, or coals from Cape Breton, will enable you to make Arrangements of this kind and such measures will show that as the Eastern States of America seem to disapprove the violence of the Southern States of the Union, Great Britain is disposed to make a just distinction in the Conduct of the War, towards them.

The Circulation of proper Publications in the neighbouring States through the medium of the Press may have good effect in awakening the Americans to the Ill conduct and Impolicy of their Government in precipitating Hostilities between the two Countries, which it was the obvious interest of America, and the express Wish of Great Britain to avoid.

Upon arriving at Halifax Prevost sent a sloop of war to the British minister at Washington with a letter announcing his presence in Nova Scotia, and a note in cipher making arrangements for the use of that code. He also sent a "respectable and intelligent Inhabitant of Halifax, first to Boston, then Washington, Norfolk, and New York, with the instructions contained in No. 1".⁸

This individual was John Howe of Halifax, king's printer in Nova Scotia. John Howe was born in Boston in 1754. Just before the Revolution he entered into a partnership with the widow of Richard Draper in the publication of the *Massachusetts Gazette*. At the time of the general evacuation on March 17, 1776, he withdrew to Halifax, but at the end of that year went with the British forces to Newport, where from January, 1777, until (probably) October, 1779, he published in the royalist interest the *Newport Gazette*. Settling at Halifax he began on January 5, 1781, the publication of the *Halifax Journal*, became king's printer, and later postmaster-general of the Maritime Provinces, also having charge of the important Halifax post-office. He died in 1835. To many he is best known as the father of the famous Nova Scotian statesman Joseph Howe.⁹

Upon Howe's return from his first mission it was deemed best to obtain further information, and he was prevailed upon to make a second trip, which lasted from November 10, 1808, to January 5, 1809. His instructions, with which the second installment of the

⁸ Can. Arch., series M, 577 E, Prevost to Cooke, Apr. 27, 1808.

⁹ James W. Longley, *Joseph Howe*, pp. 1-4; James H. Stark, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts*, pp. 361-364; Lorenzo Sabine, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution*, I. 548-550.

papers here printed will open, were sent as queries to British consuls in both the northern and southern states.¹⁰

In conclusion it may be noted that Howe's report on the disposition of the eastern states was so satisfactory, as a result of his second mission, that on it Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost decided to proceed on his expedition to the West Indies.¹¹

DAVID W. PARKER.

I. GIROD TO WENTWORTH.

To Sir John Wentworth Bart.¹²

Report of a Journey to the United States of America.

Sir,

It having been represented to Admiral Berkeley that a considerable armament of Vessels and Troops was forming in the Bay of Penobscot, and it being deem'd necessary for the good of His Majesty's Service to ascertain the nature and extent of the preparations, I proceeded in the beginning of the Month of November 1807 at the joint request of his Excellency the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, of Admiral Berkeley¹³ and of Major Genl. Hunter, commanding the Garrison of Halifax to reconnoitre the position of Penobscot now call'd Castine, situated on the Eastern shore of the Bay and about 150 miles from the eastern frontier of the United States, and having assum'd the character of a Swiss, I had an opportunity of examining the post, but found not the smallest appearance of any hostile preparations, there being at that time not more than five small vessels in the port, all of which were either loaded with wood or haul'd up on the shore; a single company of Militia of the town was the only Military force in that neighbourhood, these were, as I was inform'd, occasionally exercis'd to the use of the great guns, the fort situated at the extremity of the peninsula and commanding the entrance of the harbour, appear'd to have been long neglected, this fort built by His Majesty's forces during the war was always kept by them, the Americans having made an attack on it, were repuls'd with considerable loss. Having satisfied myself on this head, I proceeded according to the instructions I had receiv'd to take a view of the ports of Portland, Boston, Newport, Rhode Island, New York and Philadelphia, in neither of which, so far from finding any appearance of offensive operations, not even the slightest measures of defence had been undertaken; and on my return in the months of April and May 1808 everything was exactly in the same state in all the above ports, the summary then of my observations with respect to the naval and military situation of the country is, that there is not a single Frigate

¹⁰ Can. Arch., series M, 577 B, Prevost to Craig, Nov. 19, 1808; *ibid.*, Prevost to Cooke, Nov. 30, 1808; Can. Arch., series M, 577 H, Hunter to Castle-reagh, Jan. 9, 1809. The replies of the consuls are not at the Dominion Archives.

¹¹ Can. Arch., series M, 577 H, Prevost to Cooke, May 19, 1809.

¹² Sir John Wentworth (1737-1820), last royal governor of New Hampshire, lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia from 1792 to 1808, when he was superseded by Sir George Prevost.

¹³ Vice-Admiral George C. Berkeley, commanding on the Halifax station.